



## John Brown's Cabin at Nebraska City

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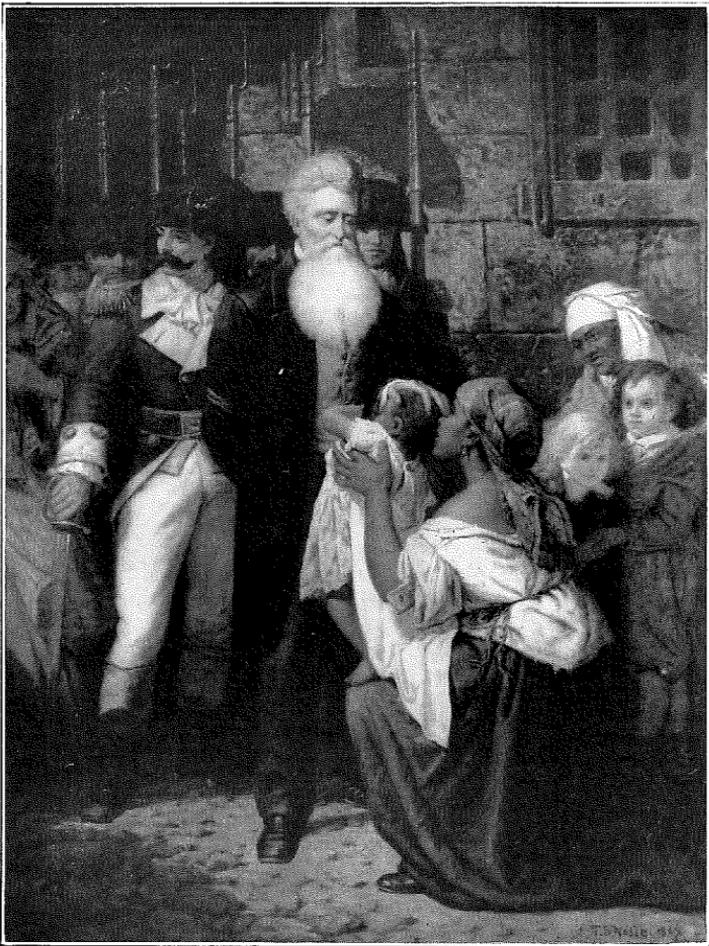
Article Summary: The author presents a brief synopsis of the cabin's history with an explanation of its restoration by its owners in the 1930s. Highway construction had made it necessary to move the structure, built in 1851.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Edward D Bartling, Allen B Mayhew, Abraham N Kagy, John Henry Kagy (originally John Henri Kagi), John Brown

Nebraska Place Names: Nebraska City

Photographs / Images: "John Brown's Blessing" (painting by Thomas S Noble), John Henry Kagi, "Last Moments of John Brown" (painting by Thomas Hovenden), John Brown's cabin at Nebraska City, main street of Nebraska City in 1859, map showing the probable trail of John Brown, map of Nebraska City in 1857



Courtesy Kansas Historical Quarterly

### "JOHN BROWN'S BLESSING"

Painting by Thomas S. Noble (1867) reproduced thru the courtesy of the New York Historical Society.

# John Brown's Cabin at Nebraska City

WAYNE OVERTURF



JOHN HENRY KAGY, AGE 24

*Editorial:* To this excellent synopsis of a long and tragic story should be added the fact that the "John Brown Cabin" and its famous cave, in possession of the Bartling family for over forty-four years, cherished and protected by them in so far as the inflexible authority of the highway department would allow, have been restored by Edward D. Bartling after years of planning to that end.

Had this site of incomparable historic value been in New England, it would have become long ago the hub of many converging roads over which Americans from every northern state at least (including Nebraska) would have journeyed with patriotic pride. As it is, the survey for a main highway cut directly across the front of the cabin, necessitating its removal 25 feet to the north. Mr. Bartling, heroically making the best of a bad situation, set the heavy logs

in their original formation upon a foundation of natural limestone—and that was not difficult, as they were hewn and mortised by Allen B. Mayhew and Abraham N. Kagy, expert timber men. He has reconstructed the three chambers of the tunnel in precisely their original position, but instead of crawling thru them from the cabin cellar as did the slaves, visitors may now walk erect between walls of brick and limestone—and 8,552 did so walk between January 1 and September 1 of this year.

The cabin was built in 1851. Tho its relation to the original site and tunnel was sacrificed to the modern passion for a straight line, the new grounds have been landscaped by a sympathetic hand in harmony with the natural setting, the great tree was spared thru Mr. Bartling's personal appeal to the State Highway Department, and Nebraska has acquired another splendid memorial to her storied past.

In your own or the Historical Society library you may find a thin volume on "John Henry Kagy and the Old Log Cabin Home," illustrated. Herein Mr. Bartling has assembled a mass of documents not elsewhere to be found.

The hectic, lawless days that followed the repeal of the Missouri Compromise were fraught with danger and sudden death for the men actively engaged in helping slaves to escape into free territory. Nebraska City, because of its strategic location on the border of free territory, became the nidus of many a plot to smuggle slaves to freedom.



Courtesy Kansas Historical Quarterly

### “LAST MOMENTS OF JOHN BROWN”

A reproduction of Thomas Hovenden's painting (1884) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

In 1851 Allen B. Mayhew and Abraham N. Kagy, experienced frontiersmen, hewed logs and erected a cabin. That cabin is now a museum, attesting to the quality of their workmanship. A small stream of spring water meandered by the cabin, giving an abundant supply of drinking water. Mr. Kagy dug a cistern close to the cabin for the purpose of storing soft water.

In the late fifties and early sixties Nebraska City was a seething caldron of activity. Steamboats plying the Missouri River dumped huge cargoes of freight on the docks at the foot of Main Street. A constant stream of freighting wagons or "prairie schooners," drawn by six- and eight-ox teams, loaded the freight aboard and turned toward the western horizon. The town was always host to some noted Indian fighter or guide who led the huge freight caravans across the Indian-infested plains to their destination. Santa Fe, Denver, Salt Lake City and California were constantly clamoring for the luxuries of the east.

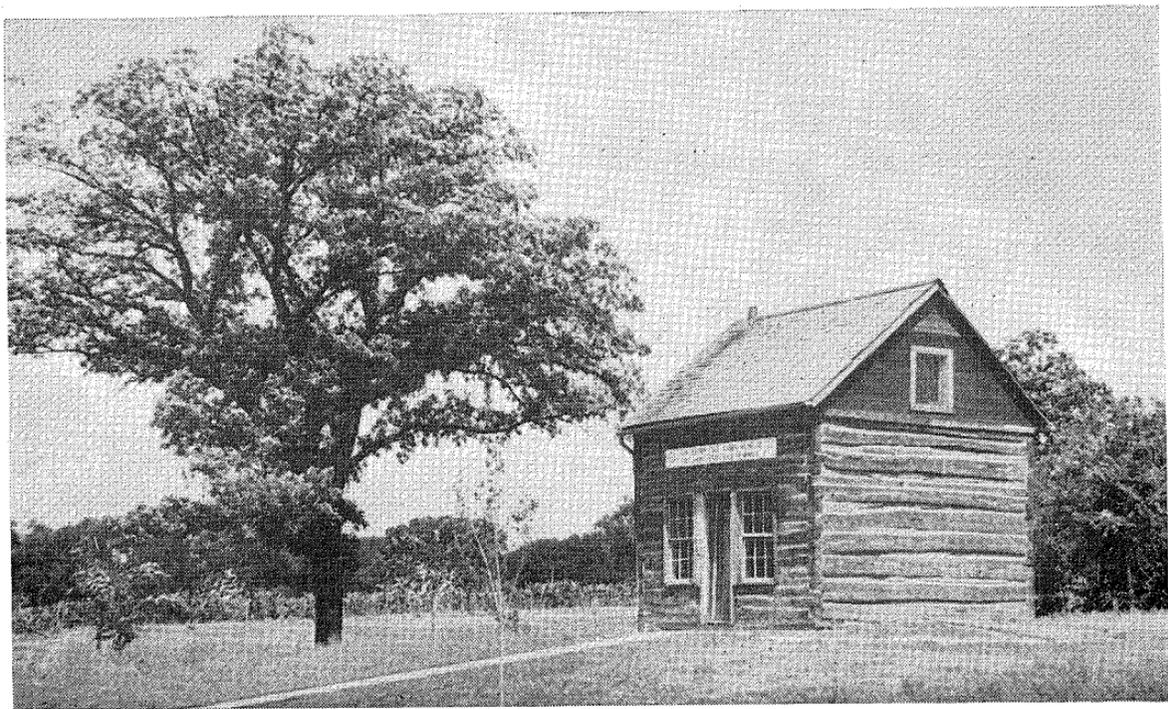
Many a freight caravan faded into the blue haze of the western plains, never to be heard of again. The Indians were the scourge of the prairie, burning, stealing and killing. Each man carried the law at his belt in the form of a six-gun and bowie knife. These men fought among themselves but were united against the red menace. Beneath this thin veneer of civilization a secret war for Liberty was being waged—the war to free the slaves.

After the Battle of Osawatimic in which John Brown, the famous abolitionist, lost a son, the cistern at the Mayhew cabin was converted into a cave, or "Black Din," as it was called by the abolitionists. The death of his son had convinced John Brown that a more secretive method of slave-running must be adopted. A "Vegetarian Society" was formed in Nebraska City. This society did its part well. Under the guise of building a huge vegetable cellar the cistern at the Mayhew home was converted into a cave—but it did not house vegetables until long after the Civil War. The entrance was well hidden in the brush along the creek bank. Ventilation was provided thru a hollow log that lay buried in the earth. One end of this log projected into the first room of the cave; the other, hidden by a clump of brush, terminated on the creek bank.

The cave was large enough to accomodate twelve or fourteen persons. No records were left from which we may determine the number of slaves who found refuge there in their flight to freedom. There they were given food and allowed to rest before resuming their journey.

There is no doubt, however, that John Brown brought hundreds of slaves to Nebraska City on their way north. The first trip by the ferry every morning, just before sunrise, was for the sole purpose of taking the Negroes into Iowa. Little or nothing is said in history of John Boulware's part in the running of slaves, but his ferry carried many to the longed-for haven.

John Brown, Captain Brown, John the Outlaw, Old John Brown of Osawatimic, the Soldier of Freedom, and Warrior Brown were among the various names applied to this hero in the last years of his struggle to free the slaves. His companions were reputed to be notorious horse thieves, but the Law (such as it was) never seemed to bother them much. At one time when Brown and his followers passed thru Nebraska City they were supposed to have a number of stolen horses. The penalty for horse-



Courtesy E. D. Bartling

JOHN BROWN'S CABIN AT NEBRASKA CITY

stealing, in those days, was death by hanging. Possession of a stolen horse was conviction of guilt. Two of Brown's horses were taken and held by the deputy sheriff; no arrests were made.

John Henry Kagy,\* a twenty-two-year-old resident of Kansas, was a staunch supporter of Brown. He was a reporter for the *Herald of Freedom* in Kansas and a correspondent of the news sheet in Washington, D. C. He was quite open in his praise of Brown and of his forays into Missouri for the purpose of stealing slaves and bringing them into free territory.

Kagy visited the log cabin where the Mayhews lived on one occasion when Brown was on one of his notorious raids. The "grapevine telegraph" informed the officers of the law where Kagy might be found, and they decided to arrest him. The charges were not stated, but the desire for this particular arrest was of short duration when it was discovered that Kagy was a man who would back up his convictions with powder and lead.

The officers went to the Mayhew home and called Mr. Mayhew outside to question him as to the whereabouts of Kagy. Mayhew told them that he was upstairs in the cabin and that they could take him if they would wait until he (Mayhew) and his family left the house. He also informed the officers that Kagy had a Sharp's rifle and plenty of ammunition to go with the hard-shooting gun, and that Kagy knew how to use it to good advantage.

After a hurried consultation the officers decided that they did not want to arrest Kagy nearly as much as they thought. This seemed to be the general trend of the activities around Nebraska City to thwart "the going-on" of John Brown — much talk and very little action.

The meager historical data available is indeed intriguing. After one of Brown's raids in Missouri, six graves were noticed a short distance from the mouth of the cave. There were no markers on the graves — just the freshly turned earth told of the final resting-place of unknown persons. At this writing all traces of the graves have disappeared.

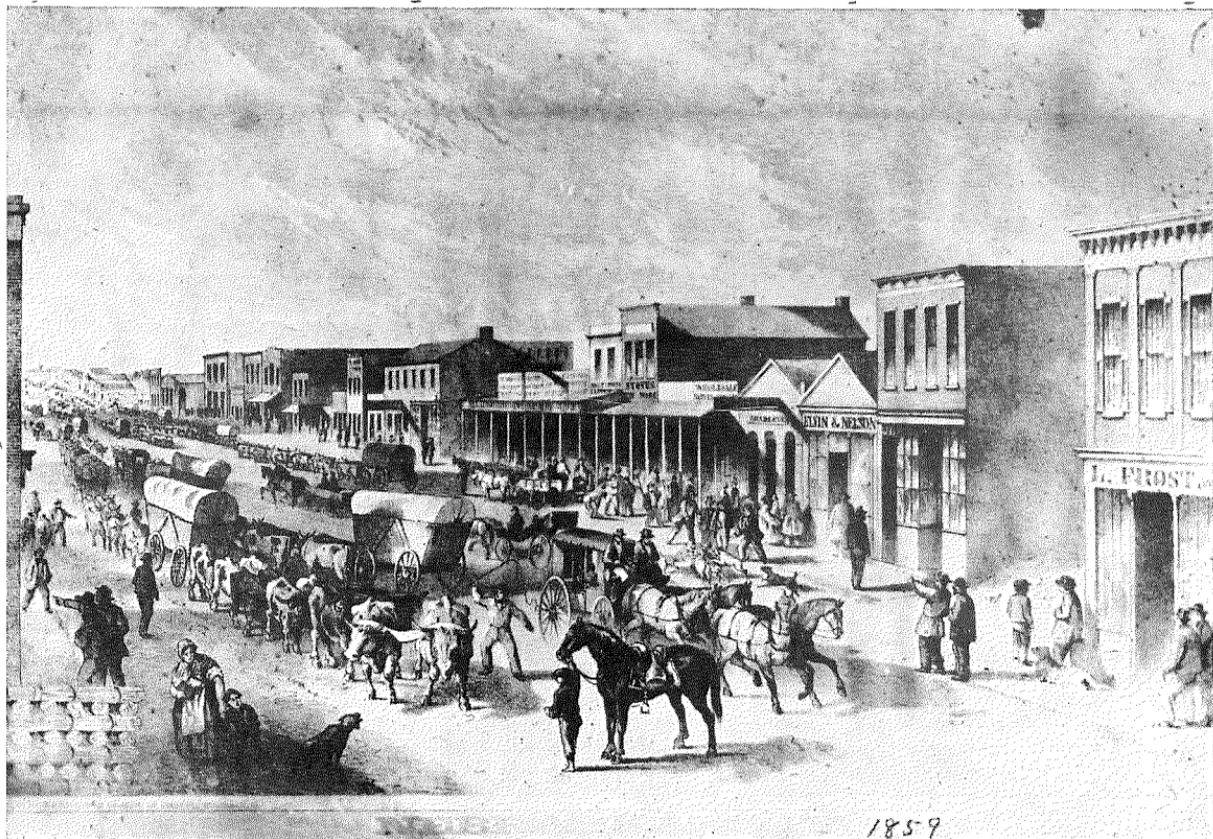
That Nebraska City stands on historic ground is beyond question. Two years ago while workmen were re-landscaping the court house lawn three graves were unearthed. There were no beads or Indian trinkets in the graves, thus giving rise to the supposition that the graves were those of white persons. Who were they? Where did they come from?

John Brown's Cave-Cabin is a fitting memorial for the man who made volumes of history that was never recorded; for the man who died at Harper's Ferry defending his convictions; for the man of whom Sherman's army sang as they marched from Atlanta to the sea:

"John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave!"

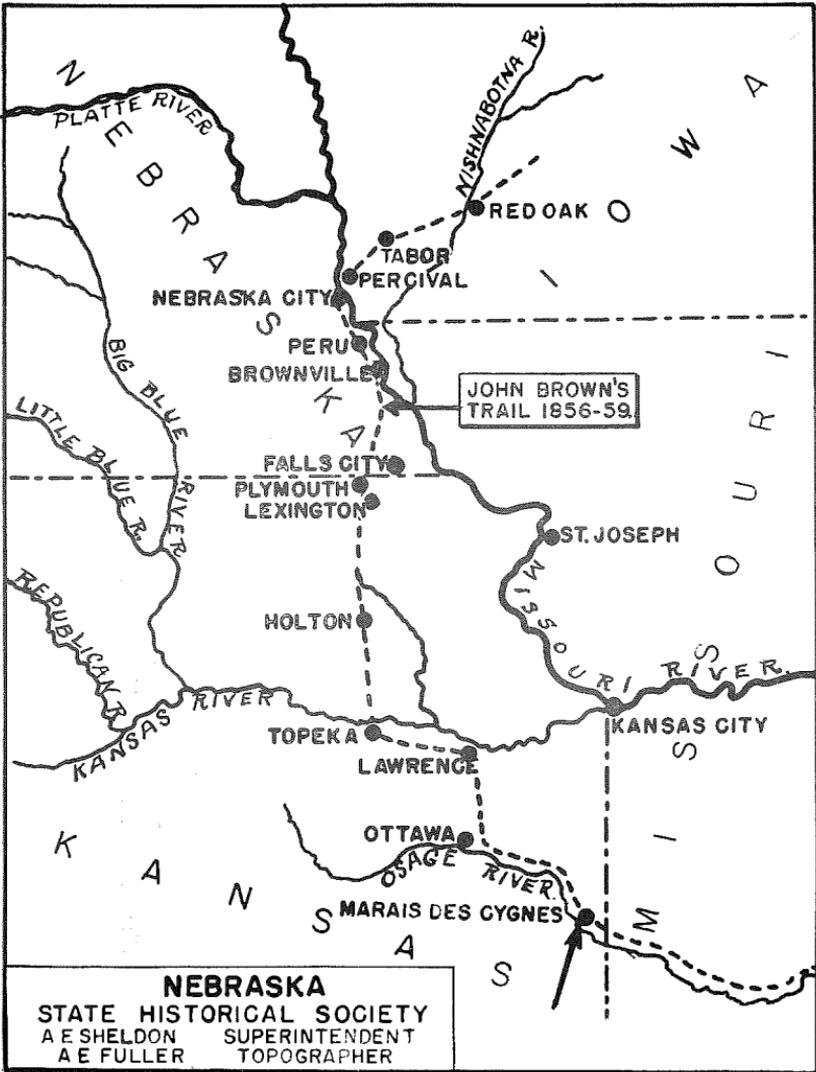
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\*The original Swiss spelling of this name was John Henrie Kagi. — *Ed.*



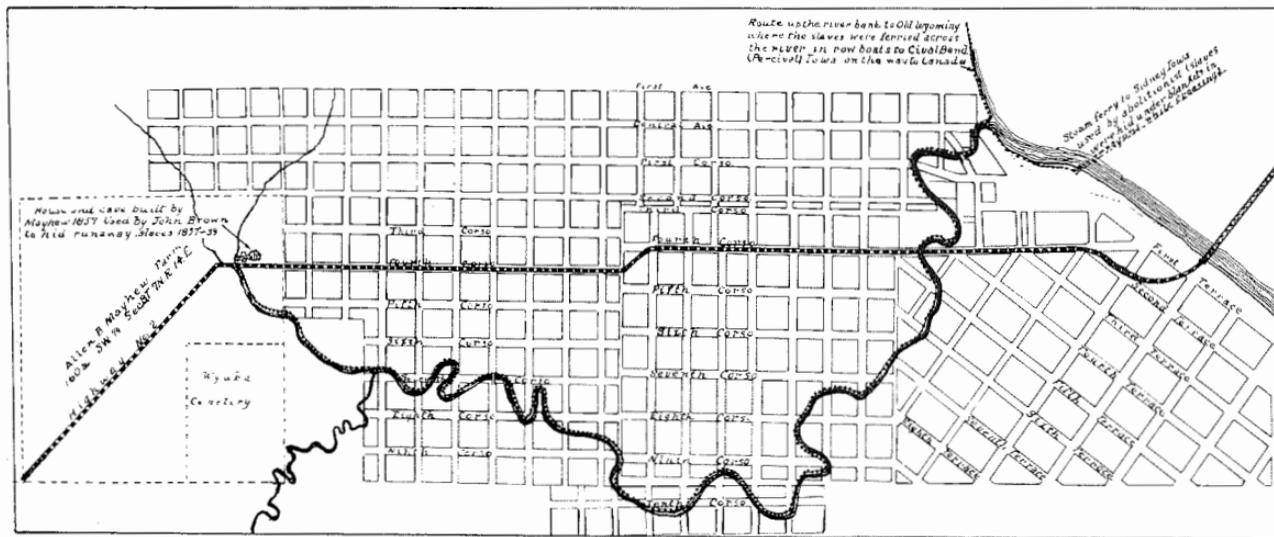
NEBRASKA CITY IN 1859

Courtesy E. D. Bartling



THE PROBABLE TRAIL OF JOHN BROWN

Marais des Cygnes (Marsh of the Swans) was the Kansas rendezvous of John Brown, and that trail was the scene of many of his most severe encounters with officers of the law.



Nebraska City — 1857. Present Highway No. 2.  
 Site of John Brown Cabin and Trail to Missouri River — 1857-59.